

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BELFAS 00033 231435Z

ACTION EUR-12

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FM AMCONSUL BELFAST

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1862

INFO AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

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UNCLAS BELFAST 33

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, UK, EI

SUBJECT: NORTHERN IRELAND: PROSPECTIVE INCREASE IN PARLIAMENTARY
REPRESENTATION

1. IT BECAME KNOWN OFFICIALLY DURING THE WEEK THAT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS' SPEAKERS CONFERENCE RECOMMENDED AN INCREASE FROM 12 TO 17 IN NI'S REPRESENTATION IN THE COMMONS. THE CONFERENCE ALSO RECOMMENDED THAT THE NI BOUNDARY COMMISSION BE EMPOWERED TO RAISE OR LOWER THE NUMBER BY ONE. REPORTEDLY THE PARLIAMENTARY AND BOUNDARY COMMISSION PROCESS WILL TAKE A COUPLE OF YEARS, SO THAT NI POLITICIANS WILL CONTEST ONLY THE PRESENT 12 SEATS FOR THE NEXT WESTMINSTER ELECTION.

2. THE ISSUE IS POLITICALLY DIVISIVE IN NI AND INCREASES SOMEWHAT THE BITTERNESS BETWEEN THE TWO POLITICAL COMMUNITIES. NI UNIONIST PARTIES AND THE NONSECTARIAN ALLIANCE PARTY SUPPORTED THE INCREASE ON THE BASIS THAT THE ABOLITION OF NI'S PARLIAMENT HAD MADE UNJUST THE PROVINCE'S UNDER REPRESENTATION IN WESTMINSTER. THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOR PARTY STRONGLY OPPOSED IT, IN PART BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED THE LABOR GOVERNMENT'S ESPOUSAL OF AN INCREASE MARKED A POLITICAL DEAL BETWEEN LABOR AND THE UNIONISTS. BUT THEY HAD OTHER ARGUMENTS:
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PAGE 02 BELFAS 00033 231435Z

(1) BRINGING THE REPRESENTATION ROUGHLY IN LINE WITH OTHER PARTS OF THE UK WAS A FURTHER STEP TOWARD NI'S INTEGRATION INTO THE UK, ALONG THE ROUTE FAVORED BY OFFICIAL UNIONIST ENOCH POWELL.

(2) CONSTITUTIONALLY, NI'S REPRESENTATION WAS PART OF THE OVERALL ANGLO-IRISH SETTLEMENT OF 1920, AND THEREFORE PART

OF AN INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT. AN INCREASE UNILATERALLY
BROACHED THAT SETTLEMENT AND OPENED UP THE ENTIRE AGREEMENT.

(3) THE SINGLE-MEMBER CONSTITUENCY SYSTEM OF ELECTIONS
WORKS AGAINST THE NI MINORITY AND INCREASES POLITICAL POLARIZATION.
PRACTICALLY, UNIONIST REPRESENTATION WILL INCREASE FROM 10 TO
14-15 SEATS, WITH TWO OR THREE SEATS THE MOST THE MINORITY CAN
HOPE FOR.

3. THE BELFAST "NEWS LETTER" FOUND THE SDLP'S CONSTITUTIONAL
ARGUMENT HILARIOUS: WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE 1920 SETTLEMENT --
HITHERTO "MALIGNED" BY REPUBLICANS AS "THE PARTITION ACT" --
DISAPPEARED WHEN STORMONT WAS ABOLISHED TO PLEASE THE SDLP.

4. BELFAST'S AFTERNOON PAPER, THE "TELEGRAPH," TOOK A
MODERATE TONE, AS IS ITS WONT. THE CASE FOR INCREASING NI'S
REPRESENTATION IS UNANSWERABLE AND THE SDLP'S CONSTITUTIONAL
ARGUMENT SPECIOUS. BUT IT IS A SECOND BEST SOLUTION NOT
LIKELY TO IMPROVE STRAINED POLITICAL RELATIONS HERE: IT
INCREASES THE BRITISH DIMENSION AT THE EXPENSE OF THE IRISH
ONE, AND "RELIEVES THE PRESSURE ON UNIONISTS FOR A SETTLEMENT
WITH THEIR POLITICAL OPPONENTS." THE SDLP NEVERTHELESS WOULD
BE ADVISED TO ACCEPT THE INCREASE AND FIGHT FOR MAXIMUM
REPRESENTATION. STOUT

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